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Concern for discipline has resulted in an emphasis on school rules and enforcement in many school districts. In order to begin to understand children's perceptions of classroom rules, the teacher and 18 children in one kindergarten class were interviewed about (1) what the rules in their classroom actually were; (2) what the punishments were; and (3) how they knew what the rules were. Although details of the rules varied considerably, responses fell within 10 general categories, with agreement between children and teacher by category on 71 percent of the rules. Children's perceptions of punishments did not reflect actual reported teacher behavior but instead emphasized a single dramatic incident as representative. Rules were learned by observation of the consequences, not by teacher instruction. (Author/RH)

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Kindergarten Children's Perceptions of Classroom Rules

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Abstract

Concern for discipline has resulted in many school districts in an emphasis on school rules and how they are enforced. In order to begin to understand children's perceptions of classroom rules, the teacher and eighteen children (9 boys, 9 girls) in one kindergarten class were interviewed as to (1) what the rules in their classroom actually were; (2) what the punishments were; and (3) how they knew what the rules were. Although details of the rules varied considerably, responses fell within 10 general categories, with agreement between children and teacher by catagery on 71% of the rules. Children's perceptions of punishments did not reflect actual reported teacher behavior but instead emphasized a single dramatic incident as representative. Rules were learned by observation of the consequences, not by teacher instruction.

Kindergarten Children's Perceptions of Classroom Rules

One of the concerns most often voiced by teachers, both seasoned and new, is that of discipline. Not only classroom teachers, but school boards and the general public are becoming more vocal about their concerns. As a result, there is a growing emphasis on classroom and school rules and how they are being enforced. Many systems have therefore adopted a discipline model that advocates posting the rules, accompanied by a list of possible punishments.

Rules and young children

Schools are social structures in themselves, and, like all social environments, come with a very elaborate system of rules for operating within that structure. These rules are the social norms against which a child's behavior is constantly being judged. A careful look at any one classroom will demonstrate to the observer that there are many more rules being enforced than just the ones that may appear on a printed list. Many of these rules have never been verbalized as such by the adult in charge. Even so, the children are well aware of the actual rules under which they are expected to operate.

It is important to anyone entering a new social system to understand the rules for behavior within that system. Knowing exactly what is expected makes the world more predictable (Shantz, 1982) and the individual more capable of successful movement within that system (Chandler, 1982). Knowing the rules does not guarantee obedience to them. In reality, young children develop elaborate procedures for getting around the rules they do not like (see Corsaro, 1985, p. 256+ for examples). It is, however, a necessary first step to learning how to get along with peers and the school itself.

Following Piaget's (1932) groundbreaking work, research on children's rule learning has tended to emphasize hypothetical situations in a clinical setting, by presenting either delimmas (two rules in conflict) or a situation where a rule is broken (Damon, 1977; Kohlberg, 1969; Selman, 1976; Turiel, 1978). The results reflect developmental differences in how children see the rules, perceptions that are qualitatively different from adult's perceptions of the same situations. This is an important finding, as it points to the role of the child's internal organization process in understanding the social world.

One limitation to the studies described above is that they approach the child's perceptions of rules

hypothetically, rather than looking at the reality of the child's world. Researchers like Corsaro (1985) have attempted to remedy this by participant observation, which provides us with naturalistic data describing children's responses to the social rules of the classroom. However, this still does not look at children's perceptions of that reality. It is important in discussing children's rule learning to remember that children do not simply internalize rules, they also interpret them (Cicourel, 1974), or in Shantz's (1982) terms, children do not merely represent reality, they transform it. It is, therefore, that interpretation of the rules that needs to be considered.

Method

In an attempt to begin to understand children's perceptions of classroom rules a pilot study was conducted in one kindergarten classroom. The study explored: (1) the children's perceptions of the nature of classroom norms, (2) their perceptions of any punishment for non-conformity, and (3) their own explanations as to how they had learned the rules. Because the emphasis was to be on the children's own perspectives, an interview format was chosen rather than an observation of actual compliance (or non-compliance) with the rules. The phenomenological nature of the data would therefore tap

into the children's own realities rather than imposing an external structure on the children involved. Because it was designed as a pilot study, it is both exploratory and descriptive in nature.

Subjects

Subjects were 18 children, 9 males, 9 females, all students in one kindergarten class in a metropolitan school. All were volunteers. Three children were absent and therefore were not included in the sample. Of the children in the sample, ten were Hispanic, eight Black. Ages ranged from 5 years 10 months to 6 years 8 months, with mean age of 6 years 3 months. The study was conducted in May, 1985. All the children had been tested on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills in April for grade level evaluation. The mean grade level (of the children participating) was first grade, second month (1.2).

Procedure

Each child was interviewed separately and privately. The interviewer had been introduced to the children as a friend of the classroom teacher and all of the children were eager to be included. The children were asked the following questions:

(1) What are the rules in your classroom? (What are the things you are supposed to do? What are the things you aren't supposed to do?)

(2) What does the teacher do for punishment if someone breaks the rules?

(3) How did you know what the rules are?

Responses were recorded in writing by the interviewer for each child. After all children had been interviewed, the teacher was also asked the first two questions under the same conditions.

Data analysis

In qualitative data of this nature, it is important to identify the patterns (Denzin, 1970), in this case the patterns that exist both in the individual perception of the norms and between individuals. Data analysis therefore followed a standard procedure for qualitative data as outlined by Bogdan and Taylor (1975). Each response was recorded separately and responses were sorted into categories. Descriptive statistics only were used to identify means and percentages of category responses.

Results

There was a total of 192 individual responses to question 1, with a mean of 10.6 per child. That is, each child listed an average of 10 rules for classroom behavior. After all responses were analyzed, it was found that, although there was little agreement among the children as to the exact details of the rules themselves,

each response fell within one of ten categories. Table 1 lists each of the ten categories and the number and percentage of responses in that category.

Insert Table 1

The norm for quiet behavior makes up a full third of all of the responses. There was considerable variation in the children's responses in this category. Very few listed a simple "be quiet". Instead, there were rules for being quiet in particular places and times; i.e., in the classroom, cafeteria, auditorium and halls. Category 2, no physical harm, includes all those rules for not hurting anyone else. These ranged from a simple "Don't hit" to the more serious "Don't kick nobody in the teeth." One child even included "Don't kill noone" in his list of rules.

Category 3 is stated in their words (no "fooling around") and includes such behavior as jumping around, "acting the fool" and all references to horseplay in general.

"Do your classwork" was a general area that included specific rules for every part of the day. All dealt with doing whatever was assigned: completing activities, watching the television programs, etc.

Category 5 includes all those regulations concerning certain behaviors allowed only within school sanctioned time frames or with teacher permission. Most of these behaviors are ones that young children do not have to regulate in a home situation, such as toileting only with permission. At times the children talked about the dangers for them in the new environment of school as a reason for the rule. "Don't look nowhere else or go nowhere else. Just listen to the teacher and don't get lost." Category 6, "being nice", was explained as sharing and not denying someone else the right to play or be friends.

The final category (Other) is included to hold all those rules that were so specific as to not fit into any category. One example was: "When you stand up to say the pledge say a nice one. Don't say a lousy pledge." None of the rules in this category appeared in the responses more than once.

Table 2 lists both the teacher's own rules and the school rules.

Insert Table 2

A comparison of the two lists shows an agreement with

categories 1, 2, 4, 5, and 7, or 71% of the children's responses falling within categories that agree with the teacher's perceptions of the rules. Therefore approximately 29% of the children's rules were not explicitely defined as such by the teacher.

An interesting difference appears when the perceptions of punishments are considered. The teacher listed only two punishments: putting the child in the corner and "yelling". The children's most frequently listed punishments were: (1) being sent to the office (17 responses); followed by (2) being put in the corner (13 responses); (3) getting a paddling or being hit (9 responses); (4) being put outside the door so the principal will find you (4 responses), and (5) being "screamed at" (2 responses). In a conversation after all interviews were completed, the teacher expressed surprise at these responses. Over the course of the school year only two children had been sent to the office and only one put out in the hall (where, in fact, the principal had come by and found him). She herself had never hit or spanked any of the children.

Perhaps the best explanation for this difference in perceptions was given by one of the children themselves. He said that when it came to punishment, "all teachers are the same." Perhaps these children had heard of

others who had been paddled and were transferring this knowledge to their own situation. It is the interpretation of the social structure mentioned in the introduction that is important here, not the reality of the punishments. Being sent to the office and being found in the hall by the principal are both very dramatic experiences for a young child and no doubt affected all the children, so much so that all but one child listed a visit with the principal as a routine punishment.

It was very easy for the children to answer the question of how they knew what the school rules were. In the words of one of the children: "Teacher showed me what nice is because some people have been to the office and some haven't." Ir other words, seeing exactly what behavior is and is not punished (or rewarded) tells the child what the rules are, both the spoken and the unspoken rules. Only one child admitted to knowing the rules because he himself had been punished for an infraction.

Implications of the study

It must be remembered that this was a pilot study, conducted with only one group of children in one classroom, and therefore does not lend itself to major conclusions. Even so, there are implications that need to be considered.

First, teachers need to realize that many of the rules for behavior in school are never clearly stated as such. The variation in these children's responses suggests that, if a school does adopt the program using a posted listing of rules, any such list would need to be very general so as to include categories of behaviors rather than specifics. To base a classroom discipline program on a given list of unbreakable rules may even be shortsighted, at least for kindergarten children. In this particular classroom, the worst infraction of the rules was one that had never been stated by the teacher but resulted in the child's being sent to the office. (Interestingly, the rule was listed by one child, perhaps the one who broke it: "Don't pee on the wall.") For children who are just beginning to organize the social world of school in their own minds, this system may be more confusing than helpful.

Second, a trend toward the use of school wide or grade-wide rules for the classroom again may well be shortsighted. Every classroom is different, just as every group of children is different. Rules that are necessary for very young children just entering school may not be so necessary for older children who have already learned how to cope with what was once a new social environment but has long since been understood.

Third, the children themselves said they learned the behavioral norm from what they saw, not what they were told. Therefore, what the teacher does is more important than what is said. This is not a new finding as research has often reminded us that this is true.

Fourth, there are implications for further research. Several questions come to mind in looking at the results from this pilot study. Are older children more in agreement with each other as to the details of the classroom norms? Are they, too, as affected by the dramatic incidents as these children are or would their description of the punishments more closely agree with the teacher's? Interviews with children at several different grade levels would begin to answer these questions.

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Table 1

Number and Percentages of Individual Responses to Question 1 by Catagories

Category of behavior in rule	# of responses	%
1. Quiet behavior	64	33%
2. No physical harm to others	28	15
3. No "fooling around"	19	10
4. Do your classwork	18	9
5. Movement only within the school's time frame	17	9
6. Be "nice" to other people	11	6
7. Listen to the teacher	10	5
8. Take care of the classroom	8	4
9. Don't take things belonging to someone else	7	4
10. Other	10	5
Totals	192	100%

Table 2

Teacher's and School's Rules

Teacher's rules:

1. Don't hurt each other.
2. Talk in a quiet voice.
3. Listen when I speak.
4. Listen to each other after you have had a turn.
5. Work when it is worktime.
6. Stay in the classroom.

School rules:

1. Be quiet in the halls.
2. No running.